

## *The Plight of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*

### *The Universal Model or Pluralism – What are the Criteria?*

This paper will try to approach the controversy over universalism (monism) and pluralism, which have concerned values in art and architecture in the aesthetic discourse of our century. It will take issue with questions that are posed with adherence to one or the other value. Although the discourse which has been concerned with this duality has been articulated in the western world and has been represented in the two great cultural narratives of the 20th century, namely Modernism and Post-Modernism it has basically dealt with the evaluation and comparison of western and non-western aesthetic approaches. And as such, it has also functioned as self-criticism within western culture.

As many adamantly held aesthetic views, the two above mentioned contrasting paradigms have had strong political and ethical implications. As the capitalist system has shown the tendency to expand infinitely, dominating all production and consumption in the world, the West has been blamed as a post-colonial power which, through its modernist philosophy which was backed up by industrialisation, claimed universal value for its own aesthetic formalism.

The basic difference between western and non-western aesthetic approaches could be claimed to be that dominant aesthetics approaches in the western world have tried to understand sensory perception intellectually. Western art, in its most prized articulations has given preference to basic forms that are thought to underlie certain systems in nature. Non-western cultures have often shown preferences for orders and forms that are difficult to gather within basic categories, orthogonal systems or pure geometry. The dominant approaches within western aesthetics have tried to find common formal denominators to explain relationships and to unite the sensory and the ideational.<sup>1</sup>

The above are generalizations, and one can find exceptions in non-western cultures where classical forms, very similar with western preferences have also been employed. Such approaches often emerge in well-established

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<sup>1</sup> Although the Cartesian system which defined mind and matter as separate categories, is criticized for divisionism, the general western attitude since antiquity, on which Descartes also based his thinking, created such a categorical duality as a detachment to take control, as some kind of Archimedean effort.

powerful social and political systems, which may imply political connections to the production and use of forms. On the other hand, there have also been configurations within western cultures, involved with specific, complex and not easily categorizeable orders; more often than not these have evolved in marginal cultural situations. Of course these cultural attitudes have been transformed in time with political and economic conditions and influences.

Hence, the difference between the western and the non-western aesthetic approaches lies not only in their perceptual attitude, but also in what one may call basically an oral or non-written cultural tradition and one that is written and theoretical. The non-western attitude and values which reinforce memory and the mnemonic rather than the written register, have basically retained the characteristics of medieval cultures. The written register, on the other hand, becomes a prosaic codification and requires labeling and classification. Although it is with industrialization, which opened the way to enlightenment, that writing penetrated all realms of life and production and affected the social make-up as well as aesthetic/perceptual approaches, the west, since antiquity had tried hard to overcome the ambiguities of oral/poetic culture, preferring to invest in the certainty of definitions and concepts possible only through writing. Today, in the post-industrial age, with new recording technologies, writing ceases to have priority over other representations. The world of interpretation that has been expanded creates a new culture which is not dependent on global and universal codifications and which, somewhat like in oral medieval cultures resume a variety of values and specificity.

Western culture's becoming a model for the world was due to the great advances achieved by industry and technology in supplying the material needs of large populations. In the international artistic arena, intellectuals and creative people from all nations and cultures also contributed to the common causes of modernism and of contemporary culture. Yet, till the 1950's, political and economic exigencies and the fact that industrial development took a long time to spread to many parts of the world, made the west a readily accepted guide in civilization. After the second half of the century which has been roughly called the era of post-modernism, the promises of modernism, industrial development and of world peace having failed, many cultures began to look for their own political and economic solutions outside the guidance of the west. As capitalist and communist powers began to lose their satellite nations, the political fragmentation created a corresponding search for cultural identity and independence.

*Western Aesthetics – Claims to the Universal*

Besides the above formal differences that can be summarized about western and non-western cultures, one major difference which greatly concerns and affects aesthetic attitudes is the practice, since antiquity, of theoretical and critical writing in the west and its being almost non-existent outside western culture. Theoretical and critical writing appeared in Greece after phonetic alphabet began to be used about 700 BC, and after the teachings of Socrates which influenced the evolution of a conceptual mode of thinking. Even when literature over art and architecture was practiced outside the west, as in China and Japan or in Ottoman culture in the 16th and 17th centuries, this was always descriptive, narrative or canonical.

The development of logical and conceptual thinking, which paralleled the development of syntactic orders in literary forms and in hierarchic orders in the visual realm, has marked the most classical and sophisticated art forms of western culture, from the renaissance to the early 20th century. But, this intellectual and conceptual quality has also been considered as a negative aspect of western culture, with the argument that such an analytical approach to the sensory was the outcome of a separation between body and mind, and was the effort to manipulate and dominate the »other«.

The claim to the universal could be made through the creation of a common reference, a code, a sign, which could stand for experience and cognition. With such a reference, experience remained as a closed individual realm which could be referred to only through art and poetry and could be interpreted only subjectively.

Conceptual definitions and analyses of sensory mechanisms and of aesthetic perception that were developed in the west, were often evaluated negatively by critics of the west as creating reductionism, limitations and categorization. On the other hand, only when a situation can be analyzed with its different aspects and when these can be understood separately and be defined, that they can be mentally conceived. Western culture may have analytically separated aspects of perceived reality into concepts and categories; but through such analyses it arrived at understanding correspondences and correlation between physical and non-physical aspects of reality and of experience, and has tried to find the unity between the mental and the physical. This created the possibility of applying theory in practice. Theory and criticism in the written tradition have been agents to promote this relationship between mind and matter by objectifying the tools for such a relationship, namely representation, language, symbols, codes. The particularity of non-western cultures seen from this perspective is that they have not



developed the conceptual and mental representations of sensory inputs, perceptual stimuli, in short, concepts and theories of perception and of the experience of reality.

Even if these marked differences between western and non-western cultures are being lost in the world of today, they have for very long been influential in the way aesthetic attitudes have evolved.

Besides, the development of industrial production in the west has especially accentuated cultural differences, emphasizing analytical and rational thinking. The development of industrial production has also been instrumental in the evolution of new political systems and values and has greatly influenced the functioning of religion. One of the most important effects of industrial production has been the development of machine aesthetics, which also employed hierarchy, basic geometry and rational relationships. With these added cultural differences in process, attitudes in aesthetics and art, and the function of these in western societies have been greatly articulated to become of primary importance within society.

Besides the influences of critical and theoretical writing, and of industrial production, another major fact that has formed aesthetic preferences and attitudes in the west, has been the relation to the body. This has its origins in Christian thought and has been reflected in the visual representation of the human figure. The concept of incarnation, meaning that existence is possible only physically, and that the soul can only exist in a body, has made representation a most important tool in understanding and talking about the physical and the non-physical aspects of reality.

Thus western aesthetics which, at the beginning of the century, claiming to be the product of progress, presented its formal values as having universal validity, has certain basic aspects which can be summarized as,

1. The significance of representation which is rooted in the idea of incarnation, and which gives power of manipulation and articulation to the subject, over the object.
2. The development of analytical, critical and theoretical discourse and literature.
3. The aesthetic of basic forms, geometries, hierarchic orders and rational relationships which are reinforced by the culture of industry and which are reflected in the machine-aesthetic.

4. A linear conception and approach to space and time which presupposes progress and a futuristic ideal, creating a space-time model that is open to manipulation by its ad infinitum controllable and measurable quality, as in perspective.

Modernism, which was the promoter for the diffusion of the above aspects of western aesthetics, claimed universality for its formal preferences that were developed in western art forms as classical orders. Art having liberated itself from any religious function by the 20th century could now claim a spiritual power because of its universal aesthetic values and also claim to have a reformatory function for society.

This latter idea and claim were also related to the belief that aesthetic preferences and choices were never a matter of practical choice and as such were free from necessity. This gave aesthetics a more elevated position than ethics with the explanation that ethical choices were in fact grounded in the aesthetic because there were no real functional or practical grounds for them. Thus, aesthetics became a realm of high spiritual value and was separated from the reality and exigency of everyday life. A further development of this view today is that aesthetics, art appreciation, and criticism, in their most advanced states, are independent of biological conditionings, and independent of nature and are developed conceptually.

The above mentioned values can basically represent the views of western aesthetics although, naturally there are other different and exceptional attitudes within western culture. On the other hand, if the above have been seen as pertaining to universally understandable forms, the exceptional and different that have remained outside these values, and aesthetic attitudes, have not been analyzed, evaluated and articulated individually.

### *Pluralism – Specificity and Search for Identity*

Starting with Claude Lévi-Strauss and structuralism, the possibility of investigation of expressions into categories such as signifier and signified (form and content) made it possible to analyze the values and expressions of other cultures and to apprehend them, casting doubt on the universality of any value system. The result was a serious skepticism about western rationalism and the rational account of history with which the west had put itself forward. During the 19th century as well as in the first half of the 20th, European artists and culture enthusiasts had revealed the riches of other cultures, primitive or sophisticated. These served as inspiration to the renewal of western art. Yet, it is after 1950s that non-European cultures' artistic expressions began to be valued for their own merits. Post-modernism brought forth »difference« as a value in itself. There have been also new awareness born of radical new facts such as the atom bomb, environmental

destruction, outer space expeditions, the contraceptive pill, etc., giving rise to new attitudes and articulations within culture and arts.

In the second half of the 20th century, political fragmentation has also given rise to aesthetic fragmentation and to the emergence of new views and voices on the artistic arena. Individuals, marginal groups, social fractions which had been hitherto quiet have since, in the search for identity and self-image, been claiming their own individual aesthetic attitudes.

Amongst some newly emerging forms we can count hybrid expressions which integrate folkloric themes or motifs with newly absorbed forms of urban culture. These often make up the aesthetic of the migrant groups. These people may be moving from one country to another, from the land to the city, or they may be moving from one social class to another, in situations where social mobility is great or where unsettled economic conditions bring unexpected gains overnight. Each culture or country may have their special examples. What is common is that such sudden changes in orientation have created the possibility of new aesthetic forms and attitudes that are reflected in the arts and in living environments. These, along with the expression of newly emerging voices of marginal groups are influencing the developments in the arts and even give impetus to new art forms such as social or environmental art.<sup>2</sup>

The picture of aesthetic views held globally in our times would be complete if we add to the monism of western aesthetics and the pluralism of non-western, marginal attitudes, the increasingly expanding fact of mass aesthetics, or forms of mass culture. This, however, is becoming a complex phenomenon, much more controversial than the analyses Ortega y Gasset has given us in his book, *The Revolt of the Masses*, or than the critical writing of Umberto Eco in his essay, »The Structure of Popular Taste«. What has started as a design for mass production, based on the basic formal preferences of western aesthetics in the beginning of the century, has developed into a production of low priced consumption goods for popular taste, with the intervention of the capitalist market. Design, which at the beginning of the century had reformist claims for society has become a commodity for the elite. While the promotion of popular taste increasingly wipes out any cultural difference, the growing power and diffusion of telecommunications used by media is employing and largely exploiting any cultural, individual and indigenous traits and qualities that may exist, as novelties for the mar-

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<sup>2</sup> In these areas, as it has always been true in the marginal, the innovative and the avant-garde, one cannot talk about a typical, rigid, western or non-western approach or aesthetics. These efforts are always transgressive of cultural and aesthetic categories.



ket. Today, in the field of culture very little is left as quality of identity, subjectivity and of the self.<sup>3</sup>

### *Setting the Criteria*

Within such rapidly changing contexts, the evaluation of these new expressions and art forms by critical aesthetic analyses would first need the formulation of new aesthetic criteria or alternative concepts of evaluation. Aesthetic evaluation and art criticism have never had absolute and fixed rules and any prescriptions about aesthetic value would take away the limitless vitality or the dynamic potential of the artwork. However, if art criticism and aesthetics are going to function as guides into the world of art and culture, such guidance needs certain assessments, claims and certain hypotheses to proceed. This is so especially in a context where multiple values vie with each other.

According to Isaiah Berlin, plurality of values can have meaning only if they are of a limited number: »I do believe that there is a plurality of values which men can and do seek, and that these values differ. There is not an infinity of them. The number of human values, of values which I can pursue while maintaining my human semblance, my human character, is finite... And the difference this makes is that if a man pursues one of these values, I, who do not, am able to understand why he pursues it or what it would be like, in his circumstances, for me to be induced to pursue it. Hence the possibility of human understanding.«<sup>4</sup>

The case could not be different for aesthetics and art, if we are appealing basically to perception, to sensory mechanisms which have to do with form. Given the existential, productive, economic and political conditions existing world wide at any time, we have to appeal to an idea of what man is, what his limits are, and what also is common amongst his many alternative states. Therefore, according to Berlin's argument, pluralism, which can be a context where different views exist side by side, would make sense if common understanding were possible.

Yet, this poses a problem. Can there be a common understanding and reasoning for all cultures? Have we not seen that even certain basic understandings have changed in time? Does not the belief in such common un-

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<sup>3</sup> One has to also see how the capitalist market is out to assimilate any new production into its own agenda.

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'My Intellectual Path', *The first and the Last*, *The New York Review*, Vol. XLV, No. 8, p. 56.

derstanding stem from the ideals of the enlightenment, for even if it entails the possibility of common goals for humanity, the fact is that for many cultures outside the west this cannot be held for the moment. In fact, within the multiple values held today, there are many which are not based on rationality or reason and stem from religious doctrines or mysticism. These claim the validity of truths or realities that cannot be explained by reason. Some even seek their legitimacy in attacking homocentric values.

The emergence of counter-enlightenment views and values makes the claim of common understanding for legitimizing pluralism, quite untenable. Thus, Isaiah Berlin's implied criteria of the human model and of human understanding fails to hold ground if some kind of contingency within human existence and understanding is accepted to be possible at any time.

From the point of view of aesthetics this contingency is most important because it is the basis for transgressions and innovation in art. The monistic/universal claim depends on a fixed model of humanity; with such a model art cannot look to the future for new experience, once it has given expression with all possible techniques available it would cease to be creative and would repeat itself.

The discourse about the end of art, which became widespread two decades ago, assumed such a viewpoint. Arthur Danto's article, »The End of Art« argued that all possible visual expressions had been rendered and art had nowhere to go; it was now the time for philosophy: art criticism. Joseph Margolis' response in the 'Endless Future of Art' was that the technical (technological) model of art which sees no future when art fulfills the technical possibilities reflected a reductionism of humanity. Margolis argued that art's development is just as related to the needs, demands and meanings of human expression at its disposal as it is to technical means. He stated that these needs and meanings will never cease to create new articulations within the infinite dynamics of human existence.

Thus, the idea of legitimizing pluralism with the hypothesis that humanity can only have limited number of values and that these can be understandable because they are limited in number proves to be wrong within the contingent human condition. It fails to solve the essential problem of correspondence and communication amongst value systems. Pluralism then ends in infinite fragmentation of the human world in the search for individual identity. Such a fragmentation and the impossibility of communication are seen today in the realm of politics as nationalism emerges as a search for identity.



### *Conclusion*

The discipline of aesthetics within philosophy emerged with a function of evaluation and determining of taste and form quality. It could be valid as a discipline, within the enlightenment, because it could base its analyses and estimations on criteria that were developed from natural facts and from empirical findings, through reason and logic. In short, it was legitimized through a scientific model.

Comparative aesthetics, as most comparative cultural studies that began in the sixties, may have benefited from structuralist methods of analyses for finding common grounds to compare disparate artistic or cultural examples. Yet, today we see that structuralist methods have not achieved impartiality or independence from European habits of thinking and evaluating. They remain dependent on conceptual categories. Deconstructivism tells us that the only way cultural and artistic expressions can be decoded is by thinking in units, parts, elements.

This claim of deconstructivism seems to explain certain facts that new technologies are imposing into our everyday and aesthetic realities. Fragmentation becomes the paradoxical way of grasping the »other« or the »self«, which is possible only in bits and pieces. The new technology of the »digit« pervades all production and habits of perceiving and thinking. This may be a kind of echo of the »monad« of Leibniz.

The claim of classicism or modernism, or of the enlightenment, of grasping the whole as a hierarchic structure of parts, which had meaning only in relation to the »center«, is no longer acceptable. In a world of pluralistic values, the common ground is the infinite whole that is constituted only in the co-existence of variety. Understanding cannot be global or absolute, it can only be fragmentary. Conceptual models cannot render the truth about the total; they can only remain as conceptual tools. Within the context of pluralism the only direct experience of reality is through intuition. Thus, common understanding in a pluralistic context can be argued for only with a hermeneutic explanation, which is not a systematic method of explaining understanding.

What kinds of implications can the above discussion have for aesthetics and art criticism?

In answering this question we can state the various positions taken vis-à-vis aesthetic values:

1. Aesthetic judgement is of universal validity.

This takes us back to Kant's argument about subjective judgement and thus, establishes a ground for the co-existence of universality and of pluralism.

2. Individual and cultural aesthetic values cannot be argued, objectively explained, or empirically tested. This implies the impossibility of common criteria or any criteria that are objectively established.

3. Aesthetic values can evolve both independently of material conditionings and can also be influenced and conditioned by them. We see that aesthetic preferences may have deep origins beyond actual conditionings, or may be molded by actual conditions and by education. This implies that identity definition through aesthetic choices can be open to manipulation and political control.

If aesthetic values are at the same time subjective, culturally and environmentally conditioned, adopted, taught, dynamic, changeable, and contingent, today where differences live side by side, no common criteria for these can be established. The plight of art criticism and aesthetics is that they cannot proceed only in relation to form or to content, but have to understand how these correspond to each other in different cases, and how their relationship may change with new technologies and media. Pluralism cannot be seen on a comparative basis, because comparison needs a common source of evaluation or criteria. Pluralism has to be taken as the natural reflection of human expression, just as pluralism is natural to nature. Each value has to be presented and explained as one specific facet of an infinity of languages and human expressions.

This paper has tried to present the basic views and characteristics of western aesthetics and of non western approaches to aesthetics, and has argued the impossibility of developing any common criteria to understand all the diversity of today's art production and cultural processes. As a conclusion it proposes that aesthetics and art criticism at their very best and insightful, become domains of interaction and poetic dialogues rather than guides to render art and cultural processes transparent and to create value control over them.